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AUTHOR Patelis, Thanos; Singer, Judith
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was twofold: to develop teachers' assessment skills and to enable teachers to apply this knowledge to the creation of assessment tasks for the language arts curriculum thereby linking curriculum to assessment. Using a newly developed language arts curriculum, 79 urban Connecticut teachers were asked to develop the assessment component after they participated in a 6-session (12 contact hours) assessment training inservice. It was found that the participants were satisfied with this inservice program. They also reported that information and skills in assessment increased, and suggested that their approaches to teaching were influenced. Suggestions to improve this inservice included more time to develop the assessments and more hands-on work. Using this type of inservice in conjunction with curriculum guide development seemed to provide a means of integrating curriculum and assessment and developing the assessment skills of teachers were developed. Investigations into the impact on student learning are suggested. (Contains 3 tables and 11 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Developing Classroom Assessment Tasks Based on a Language Arts Curriculum: An In-Service Approach

Thanos Patelis

Judith Singer

Stamford Public Schools

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was twofold: to develop teachers' assessment skills and to enable teachers to apply this knowledge to the creation of assessment tasks for the language arts curriculum, thereby linking curriculum to assessment. Using a newly developed language arts curriculum, teachers were asked to develop the assessment component after they participated in a six session (twelve contact hours) assessment training in-service. It was found that the participants were satisfied with this in-service, reported information and skills in assessment increased and suggested that their approach to teaching was influenced. Suggestions to improve this in-service included more time to develop the assessments and more hands-on work. Using this type of in-service in conjunction with curriculum guide development seemed to provide a means of integrating curriculum and assessment and developing the assessment skills of teachers. Investigations into the impact on student learning were suggested.

Developing Classroom Assessment Tasks Based on a Language Arts Curriculum: An In-Service Approach

The concern of assessment skills in teachers has been widely discussed (Stiggins, 1991; Plake, Impara & Fager, 1993). Stiggins (1991) reported that traditional assessment training for teachers has not met all the skills required of teachers in the classroom. In designing a training course for teachers, Stiggins has presented some positive results in not only the assessment skills of teachers in the classroom, but in student learning as well.

Along with Stiggins (1991), Airasian (1993) has expressed the need for measurement training to expand into areas of informal assessment procedures. Efforts to increase the coverage of measurement tests are a starting point. However, as Airasian (1993) warned, we need to make accommodations that will provide assessment activities to reflect the reality of the classroom.

The means to address these accommodations seem to be the integration of curriculum and assessment. The discussion of the advantages of a link between testing and instruction are discussed in Nitko (1989). In summary, the advantages indicated by Nitko (1989) are (1) increased information about student learning, (2) increased student motivation, (3) fairer decisions about students, and (4) proper evaluation of instruction.

Even though the advantages of the link between curriculum and instruction are well accepted, the debate between instruction-driven measurement and measurement-driven instruction is continuous, and without a clear resolution (Farr, 1994; Popham, 1994). In other discussions of this dilemma, Glaser and Silver (1994) indicated the teachers are not willing to teach within the narrow confines of a test. Glaser and Silver suggested two conditions that must be met if educational measurement will improve student learning. First, the outcomes must be considered important. Second, the assessments must be an integral part of the instruction.

In a local school district, the curriculum guides are developed by a committee of teachers and administrators. These published documents reflect the values of this committee in terms of the educational outcomes of the students. Further, in a newly developed curriculum guide, the probability that this guide reflects the valued outcomes is higher than in older versions. The assumption is made that the selection of the committee was done in a manner that represents the conscience of the local school district. In this way the curriculum guide becomes a means of fulfilling Glaser and Silver's (1994) first condition.

In addition to fulfilling Glaser and Silver's (1994) first condition, the use of the curriculum guide as the basis of developing classroom assessments is consistent with one of the steps outlined by Nitko (1995) in developing any curriculum-based assessment. The three principles suggested by Nitko (1995) were (1) the curriculum should be used to develop assessments, (2) assessment validity must be maintained through the development of an assessment system, and (3) the assessments developed must be consistent with the expectations of all educators.

Even though curriculum guides have existed for a long time, their use by teachers has been limited. Further, any prescription of assessment strategies in these guides has received similar disinterest. Therefore, even though the educational values are found in curriculum guides, their lack of use, and perhaps lack of clarity, may prevent Glaser and Silver's (1994) second condition.

In an effort to meet Glaser and Silver's (1994) two conditions, a local school district utilized a newly established curriculum guide and presented to a group of teachers an in-service in assessment using Stiggins' approach. The first condition was met by using the curriculum guide. The second condition was met by using the in-service to develop model assessments for classroom teachers that will make the objectives of the curriculum guide and these assessments practically useful for the classroom teacher.

This in-service provided the opportunity for the development of assessment skills in teachers and the production of sound assessments for the objectives specified in the curriculum guide. The development of the assessments was monitored by assessments specialists, initially. As certain teachers demonstrated increased proficiency in developing and evaluating assessments, these teachers were involved in the refinement of the assessments. Thus, this structure served to fulfill Nitko's (1995) second principle of maintaining assessment validity.

The consequences of external testing on schools and the classroom teacher have been discussed (Madaus, 1987; 1988; Smith, Edelsky, Draper, Rottenberg & Cherland, 1990, Smith & Rottenberg, 1991). However, the reports of the consequences of classroom assessment strategies are limited (e.g., Stiggins, 1991). The introduction of this in-service in assessment will give the opportunity to study changes in teacher practice.

The purposes of this paper were to demonstrate an approach that permits for the realization of the integration of curriculum and assessment and, in using this approach, increase the assessment skills and attitudes toward assessment of teachers. Secondarily, the documentation of altered teaching practices as a result of this in-service was pursued.

Method

Participants

There were 79 teachers representing grades Kindergarten through eight and one middle school principal that served as participants of the in-service. The school district is an urban school district in lower Fairfield County, Connecticut with a total public school enrollment of 14,000 students and approximately 1,100 administrators and teachers. The participants responded voluntarily to announcements in their schools of an in-service that would train teachers on sound assessment practices. Of the 80 participants, 79 (99%) were female. These participants comprised mostly (69%) from the elementary schools (i.e., grades Kindergarten through five). The other eleven

participants were from the middle schools (i.e., grades six through eight). Their participation in this in-service provided them with texts, resource materials and a stipend. Of the 80 teachers, 53 (66%) responded to the evaluation form at the end of the in-service, and seven participated in a focus group.

Instrument

The evaluation form consisted of three types of questions, demographic, attitudinal and informational. The demographic questions pertained to information about previous training in assessment, education levels, and teaching experience. There were seventeen attitudinal questions comprised of a five-point Likert scale indicating the degree of satisfaction (e.g., one represented very unsatisfied and five represented very satisfied). The aspects addressed by the attitudinal questions were the instruction (nine items), the content (three items), the physical conditions of the learning environment (four items) and an overall rating of the in-service (one item).There were three informational questions that were open-ended questions asking the participants to indicate what they learned as a result of the training session, what aspects of the in-service needed improvement, and what they found particularly helpful.

In-Service

The participants were divided into two groups, in order to create smaller classes. Each group met once a week every other week for two hours per session for six sessions (i.e., twelve contact hours). The structure of the six week in-service was developed to follow Stiggins' (1994) text on classroom assessment. The six sessions were comprised as follows: Session one was the introductory session where the purposes and uses of assessment were clarified, a historical development of assessment was introduced, and definitions of four types of assessment methods and five types of achievement targets were given and discussed. Each of the subsequent four sessions were structured to focus on the one of the four assessment methods (i.e., selected response, essay, performance assessment and personal communication). Following each session,

teachers were asked to collaborate in developing assessments in the particular method that were reviewed, piloting these assessments in their classrooms and submitting them for discussion by peers and review by the instructors. Session two, three, four and five involved reviewing the definitions of, showing examples of, developing actual assessments relating to the newly developed curriculum guide for language arts in grades Kindergarten through eight in selected response, essay, performance assessment and personal communication, respectively. Session six involved a review of a sample of the assessments submitted by the teachers in previous sessions with a discussion of sound and weak assessments. Assessments that were judged to be weak were revised. The instructors modeled the logic and process behind these revisions. Finally, feedback was obtained from the participants in an open forum format and through the use of the evaluation form.

Following the in-service, a subgroup of the participants were asked to volunteer for ten day-long sessions to refine, revise and organize all the assessments developed by the participants in the in-service. These revised assessments were incorporated into the curriculum guide. Following these sessions, a focus group was held to provide additional feedback.

Subsequent in-service sessions have been scheduled to both continue the work of updating the curriculum guide, replicating this process in other content areas (e.g., mathematics, social studies, etc.) and developing a more effective reporting system using the participants as facilitators.

Results

The results were obtained on two levels. First, feedback from the evaluation form were analyzed. Second, as support for the information from the evaluation form and to get more detailed information, the information from the focus group were summarized.

The results from the evaluation form represent the self-reported attitudes about and skills obtained as a result of this in-inservice. The demographic information from the 53 respondents of the evaluation form is presented first indicating the assessment and teaching experience of the participants. This is followed by the summary of the attitudes of the participants toward the in-service, and a summary of their acquired skills.

Of the participants that responded (i.e., n = 53), 71% did not have any previous courses in assessment. Of the remaining that had previous courses in assessment, the median number of courses taken was one. These participants with previous assessment courses rated their satisfaction with their experience as somewhat satisfied (i.e., M = 3.6, Mdn = 4.0, SD = 1.3) on the five-point Likert scale.

Of the participants responding, 49% had a master's degree and 40% went beyond the master's degree and received a sixth year degree. It is interesting to note that in this sample, even though 89% of the 53 respondents had degrees at the master's level or beyond, 71% of this sample did not have any previous course in assessment.

In terms of teaching experience, the participants that responded had a mean of 14.3 years of experience (SD = 10.0, Mdn = 15.0). These same participants spent a mean of 12.6 years (SD = 10.0, Mdn = 10.0) teaching in this local public school system.

Means (with standard deviations in parentheses) for the aggregate of the items related to instruction, content, physical conditions of the learning environment and overall satisfaction were 4.0 (0.8), 3.9 (0.9), 3.8 (0.7) and 3.8 (1.2), respectively. These mean ratings suggest that the participants were somewhat satisfied with the various aspects of the in-service.

The open-ended informational questions were content analyzed. The questions pertained to (1) the issues/skills learned as a result of the in-service, (2) the improvements needed, and (3) the aspects that were particularly helpful. The frequency

and percentages of the responses in the various categories for the question regarding what was learned are shown in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

As can be seen in Table 1, 51% of the responses indicated that what was learned pertained to definitions and used of the various types of assessments. This relates to the increased awareness of the various assessment that may be used by classroom teachers (i.e., selected response, essay, performance assessment and/or personal communication). One quote that exemplified this finding: " I have a better understanding of the different types of assessments, and which would be best to gather different types of information from my students".

The next most frequent issue/skill learned involved two items. The respondents learned the importance of having clear, specific objectives before developing assessments (14%). Thus, in order to develop sound classroom assessments, teachers realized that the objectives they were assessing needed to be clear. With similar frequency (i.e., 14%), these respondents realized the complexity of developing sound assessments, and the adequate time required.

The responses to the second question regarding suggested improvements for the in-service are provided in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

As shown in Table 2, the most frequent issue (i.e., 31% of all responses to this question) that needed improvement was the need for more time. The participants that responded indicated that they needed more time to learn and work with the concepts and issues presented. Furthermore, the second most frequent improvement mentioned (22%) was the need for more hands-on work, where teachers could develop, pilot and discuss their classroom assessments. Thus, teachers needed more time for this in-service, and this time should be spent on actual assessment development and discussion.

Finally, the responses to the question asking the participants to indicate what was most helpful are summarized in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

As can be seen in Table 3, the two items that seemed most frequent in their responses were the opportunity to discuss and reflect on assessments with colleagues and the instructors assisting their training at 42% and 30%, respectively, of all responses. Thus, the participants valued the opportunity to discuss the assessments with colleagues and to consult with the instructors who were testing experts during their training.

As a means of supporting the information presented above, and gaining detailed descriptions of the impact of the in-service, the final analysis consists of a summary of a focus group with seven of the participants that were involved in the follow-up sessions. The predominant comments, as a result of the focus groups, were (1) more hands-on work was needed supported by modeling of the process involved, (2) allow more time for reflections and discussion, and (3) new concerns about the dissemination of the assessments developed and a monitored reporting system of student results.

The first issue about more hands-on work support the results from the evaluation form. However, more specific suggestions were provided in that the instructors needed to do more modeling of the how to go from an objective into the development of items. In addition, after this was done, the teachers should replicate this process in their classrooms, and return after the assessments were piloted to discuss with colleagues and consult with the instructors.

After going through this in-service, and appreciating the complexity and time involved, the participants expressed a concern in the dissemination of the developed assessments, and the development of a monitored reporting system.

Discussion

In order to realize the advantages of the integration of curriculum and assessment (see Nitko, 1989), an in-service was provided for teachers to develop the assessments for a newly formed curriculum guide. The in-service provided training in the development of sound classroom assessments using an approach suggested by Stiggins (1994) with the purpose of developing the assessment component of the new curriculum guide. As a result, the attitudes and skills reported by teachers demonstrated that efforts to make sophisticated assessment issues consumable by teachers can be done when such training is integrated with curriculum development. Thus, in this manner the two conditions that are suggested by Glaser and Silver (1994) as necessary for educational measurement to improve student learning are fulfilled by this process.

While the positive attitudes toward this in-service and self-reported increase of assessment skills and awareness were found, the demonstration that these translate to improved student learning was not addressed here. Therefore, further investigation in the impact of this in-service on student achievement is warranted.

In addition to this limitation, the comments from the participants indicated that to improve this in-service, additional time and hands-on activities should be

implemented. Thus, future assessment training for teachers needs to be in the context of the classroom. Therefore, a local school district should provide assessment training in-service in conjunction with curriculum writing endeavors.

As a result of this process where assessment training was done in the context of the curriculum and teacher experiences, more technically sound and educationally relevant assessments were developed for publication into a curriculum guide.

Further, as a result of this in-service, concerns about dissemination, additional training, reporting methods and supervision developed. These concerns may not have had become salient without the exposure the teachers received to various types of assessment methods and issues during the in-service.

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Table 1

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to the Question of Issues/Skills Learned as a Result of the In-Service

Category	n	%
Definitions and use of different types of assessments	29	51
Need for clear and specific objectives	8	14
Realization of the complexity of assessment development	8	14
Item writing and rubric development	6	11
Skills to critique assessments	3	5
Familiar with objectives of curriculum guide	2	4
Historical perspective of assessment in schools	1	1
Total	57	100

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to the Question of Suggested Improvements for the In-Service

Category	n	%
More time	18	31
More hands-on and group work	13	22
Review concepts before assignments	8	14
Text and supporting material	7	12
Structure of the in-service	6	10
Too much work	5	8
Pay teachers for assignments, as well	2	3
Total Responses	59	100

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of Responses to the Question of What Aspects of In-Service Were Most Helpful

Category	n	%
Opportunity to discuss and reflect on assessments with colleagues	18	42
Instructors	13	30
Information provided during in-service	4	9
Assignments	4	9
Organization of the in-service	2	4
Review of material at each session	1	2
Text used for in-service	1	2
Total Responses	43	100